Motivation

The Institute of Technology Sligo contributed to the development of Epigeum’s Academic Success: Skills for Learning, Skills for Life programme in 2015 – recognising, during their research into the challenges of transitioning from second- to third-level education, that “this seemed to be something that was missing from our own supports”. Head of Online Learning Gavin Clinch and Instructional Designer Jennifer Gilligan have led the programme’s implementation, and while both are convinced of the programme’s quality, they have found that the challenge lies in driving student engagement. As a result, they have explored various strategies to make non-compulsory online training as accessible and attractive as possible – using the Academic Success programme as a tool to help students take greater responsibility for their own learning, as part of a wider initiative to support students in making a success of their time in higher education through the development and delivery of digital supports.

Accessibility

First, the modules needed to be accessible. Student feedback highlighted the need to easily identify and access relevant content, without encountering long lists of modules or self-enrolment buttons – especially for “just-in-time” training. The decision was therefore made to customise the Institute’s Moodle dashboard to create a ‘My Supports’ tab for all campus-based and online students, this being, as Jennifer explains, “the one place that we knew all students came into”, with additional signposting on the Institute’s website, in Moodle, and as part of an induction course. This year, they have also taken steps to improve navigability, so that “instead of content being completely expanded on one screen, and scrolling, and scrolling, we’re using tiles, so that every piece of content is grouped”.

Crucially, integration between Moodle and the Institute’s registration system has allowed for automatic student enrolment, providing a way to introduce students to core training and support prior to the start of term, and capitalise on their eagerness to engage with university life in the weeks before their academic courses become available.

“It’s also the one place that they have a social area that’s open to all students”, adds Jennifer: embedded alongside the first Academic Success module is an online chat forum to “start engagement early, and get them talking to each other and helping each other out”. Members of staff are also enrolled in the Academic Success programme, so that they can explore the content of the modules, and track their students’ progress.
Engagement

Indeed, tracking progress has been central to Gavin and Jennifer’s work, and they have seen “a natural progression” from using self-regulation gauges to more sophisticated measurements of achievement – “validating the autonomy of the students using the course on their own and completing it”.

Initially, automated tick boxes were used to indicate when modules and their accompanying quizzes were completed, as well as an overarching progress bar, which uniquely displayed every student’s particular progress. However, with the introduction of new digital badges – issued to students who have completed the Academic Success or Academic Integrity training programmes, and achieved a score of 80% or higher on the accompanying quizzes – the Institute has established a symbolic reward system that encourages and celebrates independent learning. As well as integrating “a little bit of gamification”, the badges also represent an efficient means of collecting data on students who have undertaken training in their own time – facilitating more meaningful reporting.

The Future

Gavin and Jennifer intend to introduce additional digital badges to mark achievement in areas such as ‘Peer Mentoring’ or for work as a ‘Student Ambassador’, and potentially use them as part of an online e-portfolio to record academic and non-academic milestones. It’s a “slow burn”, explains Jennifer, but ideally the badges might one day be integrated into formal programmes of study, with the flexibility for students to dip in and out of the training throughout the year, and completion being recognised as part of their final grade.

Communicating the importance of self-motivation and self-assessment is at the heart of Gavin and Jennifer’s approach to online training, and their creative implementation of Academic Success has allowed them to deliver this message, whilst also providing much-needed support at a crucial moment in their students’ lives. As Gavin explains, “research shows that the transition from secondary to tertiary education is fraught and many students encounter major challenges such as adapting to college life, socializing, and managing their study time. Epigeum’s Academic Success courses help to ease this transition and to better prepare students for life, study and success. Our students really appreciate the accessibility, the content and the quality of these online courses.”